

Time and Placement

Durango, Colorado, U.S.

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July 24, 2017 by [Scott Gilbertson](#)

Every evening around 5 the thunder starts in. You could set your watch by it. Except that there's no need for a watch up here.



The way it cracks high and seems to cascade down the mountains reminds me of Greek or Norse stories, the sound feels thrown by some unseen thing. This evening those thunder gods, whomever they may be, have conspired to produce something a little extra. Thor is pounding a little harder, Zeus throwing a little more than usual. A flash and then seconds later a rolling peel of sound the echoes off to the east, down the mountain side.

Around here they call this the start of the monsoon season¹. The rain comes soft and steady, the kind that leaves no puddles here in the forest, much to my children's disappointment. Here all the water is captured by something, held in a bed of rotting needles, leaves, and the roots of rice grass, false oats and mountain parsley. What little makes it lower ends up in the roots of gambel oak and snow willows, and finally somewhere deeper still, up to 12 meters down, the ponderosa pine roots and their attendant webs

of fungi get what's left.

Nothing remains on the surface of things.

It is easy here to sink into the soil and disappear for a while, everything here is doing it, you are too.



The valley wall opposite our camp has disappeared in a rainy mist of blue gray nothingness. The light is fading prematurely, leaving a shadowless forest where darkness fades in rather than falling as it does when the sun ducks behind the ridge.

It is silence save the soft pelting of rain and the call and response of two hardy wood peewees, seemingly unfazed by the storm. And then some storm god throws another bolt and the silence is blasted apart.

I am sitting here listening to the rain, feeling the pace of my chair sinking into the soil. It is a slow but steady rain, a slow but steady sinking.

I am listening to the rain because that is what you do when it rains.

In every place the rain sounds different.

Here the rain has a soft and spread out sound. The rain that reaches down here does not do so directly, not much of it anyway. Most of it has hit at least one, probably hundreds, of pine needles on its way to the earth. These drops are small and soft because they have been broken up on their way down. By the time they hit the ground they are more alike than different, every drop having been similarly, but

differently bounced through the pine canopy. The result is a steady even sound, occasionally broken up by the rougher splatter of rain coming through a gap in the canopy to land on oak leaves, or the split wood of the picnic table, or the roof of the bus.

Somewhere out there is a forest. It's too dark now to see more than a few feet in front of me. There are two trees at the edge of what faint light the rising moon offers tonight, locked away as it is, somewhere behind a veil of cloud. There's just enough glow that I can still make out the roughness of the tree bark. The curve of their trunks hint at the vastness of space behind them. Despite the rain it is dry here next to the trunks of the pines, whatever water has made it through the canopy is already down below the surface of the needles I'm lying on, staring up, trying to see the branches coming together above me.

One of the more remarkable things about lying on your back in the forest is that you can stare up at the trees running together up into the vastness of space and you can feel the planet spinning through the heavens, but at the same time you can smell the warm fecundity of the soil, all the billions of microbes you're lying on churning their way through the seemingly endless supply of organic material of the forest, one day you. You can feel for fleeting moments the vastness of existence and the minute intimacy of existence at the same time. You find yourself in a web of life and energy that is flowing all around and through you.

It is impossible to tease apart all the links between everything micro and macro, do not even try. In one way you are you, the you you experience, in another you are the joining together of cells of that found it advantageous to become parts of a whole rather than go it alone — which one is you? That's the wrong question. Know that all of this is you. All those solitary cells within you are now too specialized to survive without the rest of you, they gave up their individuality to all you to exist. As has already been pointed out, hundreds if not thousands of years before we had the language of microbes and devil of the details by the tail, the wiser among realized that the biggest thing is in the smallest thing.

John Muir, who spent his fair share of time lying on his back in pine forests, captures this feeling better than I can when he wrote, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."

I think this is one of the principle realizations travel unpacks for you — that there is no other. You are a part of a whole, interconnected system and joined far more intimately to everything around you than you could ever hope to understand, though attempting to understand it is worth the effort, even if it's impossible. Travel doesn't make it any easier to understand it, but sometimes when you travel you can *feel* it all around you, moving and flowing through you like an invisible wind.





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1. I can only assume no one around here has ever been in a real monsoon, because while it does rain a little more, it's hardly what most of the world would call a monsoon. [↩](#)

6 Comments



classical_liberal August 13, 2017 at 2:42 p.m.

Just commenting to let you know I'm still following your adventures every week. Your writing continues to impress. Thanks for taking the effort.



[Scott](#) August 15, 2017 at 7:58 a.m.

@classical_liberal-

Glad you're enjoying it. I think I might actually get caught up one of these days.



Drew Eldridge August 15, 2017 at 2:36 p.m.

We were just discussing this on our way to Pink Floyd concert this weekend.....

Is this reincarnation?

“microbes you're lying on churning their way through the seemingly endless supply of organic material of the forest, one day you.”

If so, I guess I believe in it.



[Scott](#) August 17, 2017 at 7:09 p.m.

@Drew- You guys were discussing luxagraf on your way to the Floyd show? I should probably just drop the mic and walk away. ;-)

I do have some thoughts on reincarnation that I consider publishing from time to time, but that was really more just thinking about the lifecycle of all things, and that the boundary between life and what we call death seems maybe not as hard and fast as we (in the west) have been trained to think.

I've been reading several ecology books lately, which have influenced my thinking considerably. I almost added a note to this post crediting David George Haskell's *The Songs of Trees* ([library link](#)) for some of the ideas. So I'll add it here, if you like this post or are intrigued by the ideas, I highly recommend his book. It's a great, very lyrical, not at all technical or dry intro to ecology.



Drew Eldridge August 18, 2017 at 9:55 p.m.

Im too lazy to read- I bought it on audible and will listen to it with Sam on the way to school. Lets see how fast I can make him fall asleep at 630AM... Right now we are listening to Tommy Caldwell's "The Push" which is fantastic!



[Scott](#) August 21, 2017 at 12:55 p.m.

@Drew-

Nice. I'm the opposite, I can't handle audiobooks.